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Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's Complete Penetration through the Sense Organ of Hearing (part 2)

A talk on the *Surangama Sutra* given by Master Sheng-yen on Dec. 3, 1995, and edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller

At first, by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters it became quiescent. Both movement and stillness were clearly non-existent. Thus, advancing step by step, both hearing and its object ceased completely. But I did not stop when they ended. Not abiding in awareness (enlightenment, chueh, 覺) of this state, both the awareness (enlightenment) and the object of awareness were realized as empty. Enlightenment became perfect. Both creation and extinction were extinguished and the state of Nirvana (quiescent extinction) manifested.

In this section of the *Surangama Sutra*, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva talks about complete penetration through the sense organ of hearing, and the levels that lead to it. Avalokitesvara says, "At first, by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters it became quiescent. Both movement and stillness became clearly non-existent." As I said before (Ch'an Newsletter #114), this is the first level of penetration.

The next level of penetration is described in the next sentence: "Thus, advancing step by step, both hearing and its object ceased completely." "Not abiding in awareness of this state, both the awareness and the object of awareness were realized as empty," describes the third stage. "Enlightenment (awareness) became perfect." is a description of the fourth level. Finally there is a summary, "Both creation and extinction are extinguished and the state of Nirvana manifested," describes complete penetration.

These levels of realization or penetration are subtle. It is impossible to truly understand them conceptually. You must experience them yourself. To talk about them intellectually is a little like talking about the theory of military strategy without any actual experience in battle. However, I will try to explain them.

Let us return to the first level: "At first by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, both the stream and the subject which enters it became quiescent. Both movement and stillness

were clearly non-existent." Movement and stillness refer to what one receives from the external environment. Movement is sound, what you hear, and stillness is when you do not hear anything. Both movement and stillness are received through the sense organ of hearing. If both movement and stillness are clearly non-existent, is there anything left in the external environment which can be said to exist? Stillness and movement are two ideas or feelings which are relative to each other. Only with the cessation of movement can you know stillness, only relative to stillness can you know movement. When neither movement nor stillness exists, we can say that the external environment has no existence.

Avalokitesvara describes the second level of penetration: "Thus, advancing step by step, both hearing and its object ceased completely..." Movement and stillness come from the external environment. They are the object of hearing. In the first stage of penetration, only the environment has no existence. The self (the subject) and the functioning of the sense organs are still present. In the second stage the subject who senses is also seen to have no existence. These two levels are not so different. As with all of these levels, it is a matter of gradation. One step naturally leads to another.

Avalokitesvara talked about penetration using the

sense organ of hearing, in this case, but these levels of penetration apply to all sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind).

The experience of cessation of object and subject need not happen when you sit in meditation. It



The external environment has no existence.

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may happen during any daily activity. A teacher who is not very clear about the situation may misinterpret such an experience and cite it as an experience of enlightenment. But a good teacher, or a great teacher like the ancient masters, will not affirm a practitioner's realization so easily. He or she will ask the practitioner a variety of questions which will elicit to what degree, if any, an enlightenment experience has occurred. There is no hiding. Nevertheless, to have the experience of the cessation of hearing and its object, even temporarily, is very good.

At the second level, "completely" is very important. Subject and object cease completely, which means that henceforth the practitioner is no longer subject to the influence or disturbance of the

senses. It is a difficult state to reach. It is a kind of Mahayana Samadhi, called “purity of the six sense organs.” At this second level your sense organs function, you can hear, see, etc., but you are completely undisturbed by what your senses encounter. As you can imagine, such a state is not easily attainable.

If you have eaten and you are full, and you are not tempted to eat even by your favorite food, you may feel that you have attained purity of the six sense organs. Later, when you feel hungry again, and you smell your favorite food, you might even say to yourself, “I have attained purity of the six sense organs. I will not eat.” Is this purity of the six sense organs? Do you refrain from eating because you don’t have the thought to eat, or because you dare not eat?

When you have attained purity of the six sense organs, you eat out of need, not out of attachment to the taste of food. You will not be greedy for food, like a hungry ghost. If there is nothing to eat, or eating is inappropriate, you will not salivate. There will be no thought of food.

If a bodhisattva who has attained purity of the six sense organs encounters someone who is sexually attractive, no thought of desire will arise. The bodhisattva will not react physiologically or psychologically. There will be no temptation. This is purity of the six sense organs, and it is also freedom of the six sense organs.

Most of us are easily tempted. We may be able to resist temptation, but we recognize that we feel tempted. A bodhisattva who has attained purity of the six sense organs feels no such temptation. Precepts are followed and kept pure.

Avalokitesvara describes the next level as, “Not abiding in the awareness of this state, both the awareness and object of awareness are realized as empty.” “This state” refers to the second level,

in which both hearing and the object of hearing cease. At the third level, the practitioner is not abiding in the awareness of the second level. Both the awareness and the object of awareness are empty. In Chinese, the character for “awareness” and “enlightenment” is the same: *chúeh* 覺. Here, “awareness” means the six consciousnesses, which were purified of all vexation in the second stage. This “awareness” is the wisdom of the practitioner, which realizes emptiness. The “object of awareness” refers to the six sense organs, the six sense objects (things we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch or perceive with our minds), and the six sense consciousnesses. These are the eighteen realms. At the third level, all eighteen realms are realized as empty. The first twelve are the objects of awareness and the last six, the consciousnesses, are referred to together as “awareness” here, because they have been purified of all vexations.

The second stage, when hearing and the object of hearing cease “completely”, is called “emptiness of personal self.” The third stage, when both awareness and the object of awareness are empty, is called “emptiness of dharma self.”

Put concisely: in the second stage both hearing and the object of hearing cease completely. In the third stage, all eighteen realms — the six sense organs, the six sense objects, and even the six sense consciousnesses — the “objects” of a higher level of awareness, are emptied. Awareness, in this sense, is wisdom.

The nature of the state where awareness and the object of awareness are both empty may seem confusing. Actually it’s quite simple. In Chinese there is a phrase literally translated as “put down” (*fàng-hsia* 放下). But “put down” has a different connotation in English, so we use an equivalent phrase, “leave behind.” If you can “put down” everything or “leave behind” everything, including the idea of leaving behind everything, then

you have reached the point when awareness and the object of awareness are both empty. If you think, "I have put down everything. I have left behind everything," then you are holding on to the idea of putting down, of letting go, of leaving behind.

A practitioner told his master, "Master, I have put down everything. Now I feel so free! There is nothing for me to hold on to." The Master responded, "This is heavier than Mount Sumeru!" In ancient Indian mythology, Mount Sumeru was the center of the universe, and reached from heaven to hell. If the disciple had already left behind everything, and felt so free and at ease, why did his Master say that this was heavier than Mount Sumeru? Can anybody answer this question?

R.: The master says he is heavier because he still hasn't let go of the fact that he has let go. There still is the duality of having let go or leaving. He has not left that. He is still holding on to it.

Shih-fu: Ah yes - so smart!

Now we go to the next level, "Enlightenment (awareness) became perfect." At the fourth level the emptiness of awareness (enlightenment) reaches completion. Completion means that both emptiness as well as the object which has been emptied are extinguished. The practitioner reaches the perfection of Buddhahood.

This can be simply explained. Let's imagine I have a cup of water. Next, I drink the water, so the cup is empty. Next I empty or let go of the idea of the emptiness of the cup. I can proceed further, but to do so I don't need to say anything more. Earlier I could still say I'm letting go of the idea of emptiness. When I proceed to let go of the idea I can no longer say anything.

At this level you completely let go of emptiness,

the object of emptiness and any idea of the completion of emptiness. At the highest level of emptiness you completely drop all of these considerations and concepts.

Finally, Avalokitesvara summarizes, "Both creation and extinction were extinguished and the state of Nirvana manifested." "Creation and extinction..." refer to all concepts of existence, non-existence, emptiness, non-emptiness, gain, extinction, etc.

The first two stages involve both creation and extinguishing. In the first stage, the practitioner "gains" a realization, and movement and stillness are "extinguished." In the second stage, the practitioner advances step by step, "gaining" deeper realization, and both hearing and its object are "extinguished". The third and fourth steps involve only extinguishing. And finally, there is a summary.

In the process of proceeding through these levels, the wisdom you have in the beginning grows to become the complete wisdom of the Buddha. When you can let go of even the complete wisdom of the Buddha, then that is genuine completion. That is genuine quiescence.

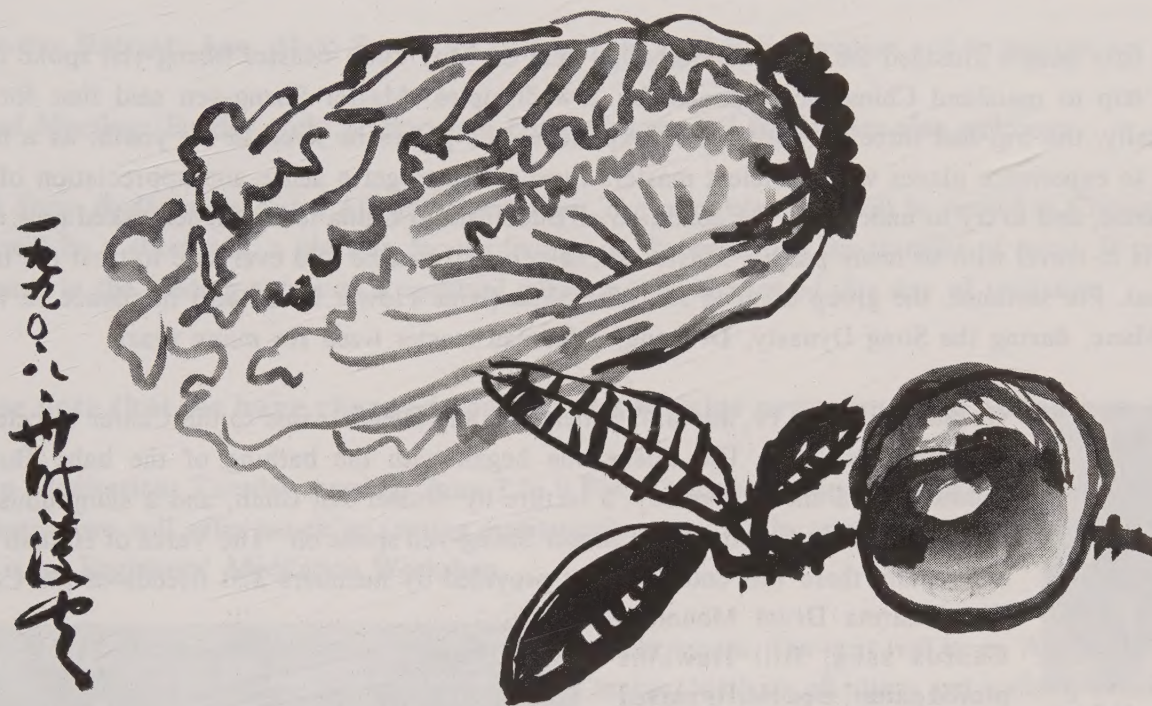
Does completion of penetration mean that there is no need to deliver sentient beings? There is no need to do anything?

Student: No!

Shih-fu: Ah! Completion of penetration means that everything is as it is. No matter what you consider good, no matter what you consider bad, everything is as it is. There is no need to seek or to abandon, or to increase or decrease anything. But whatever needs to be done, a bodhisattva still proceeds to do. But it is done without attachment.

The expression, "Everything is as it is" has to be understood very clearly. When you have no at-

beginning of the sutra, where the content seems simple and basic. Why do you do that?" His re-



Everything is as it is.

Nora Ling-yun Shih

tachment whatsoever, then "everything is as it is" for you. You will not create any problems and you will not let anything distress you. However, if you still have vexations, you cannot just say, "Everything is as it is," and think that it is true. As long as you experience anything as a problem, you had better work on it.

This paragraph from the sutra that we have discussed is deep and difficult to understand. There is really nothing more that I can say about it.

Years ago I said to an old Dharma Master, "It seems that in your Dharma talks, you just touch on the most important and difficult points in the sutra, and cover them in a couple of sentences. Yet you spend a lot of time talking about the

sponse was quite interesting.

He said, "There's no need to add anything to the part of the text which is already so rich and complex. It is only the beginning, which is so ordinary, or mundane, which I try to embellish and enrich." When you come to a point in a sutra which is really splendid and subtle, it is simply not possible to give an explanation.

I'm happy that I have managed to say a little about this difficult paragraph. If you are confused, then you can wait till you attain Buddhahood and you will understand. If you do not have faith that what we discussed today is important, it doesn't matter. By the time you reach Buddhahood you will have faith.

News from the Center:

The Center hosted a second Dharma Day for young adults on April 27. Participants went to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden to take part in the Japanese style Cherry Blossom Celebration.

About fifty people attended the Dharma Gathering held on May 10th. Master Sheng-yen spoke on his recent trip to mainland China, accompanied by 298 disciples. Master Sheng-yen said that for him, personally, the trip had three purposes: to re experience the places he lived in his youth, as a novice monk, to experience places where ancient masters lived to try to get a sense and appreciation of their experience, and to try to understand the condition of Buddhism in China today. When asked how it was possible to travel with so many people, Master Sheng-yen said that he told everyone to treat the trip as a retreat. For instance, the group climbed Jiu Wha Shan (Nine Flower Mountain) in silence to visit a cave where, during the Sung Dynasty, Di-tzang, a Korean master lived for many years.



Estelle M.C.ed

On Sunday, May 19, about 450 members and friends came to the Center to celebrate Buddha's Birthday. The celebration began with the bathing of the baby Buddha, followed by a short ceremony, a lecture by Master Jen Chun, and a sumptuous vegetarian lunch. In the afternoon Master Sheng-yen spoke on "The Value of Human Life" and finally there was entertainment provided by members and friends of the Center.

The Dharma Drum Mountain Chorus sang, Bill Hawkins played guitar, Dee Harris played sitar, accompanied by Rocki

Shore, Rebecca Brandt and Lindley Hanlon sang, and Bruce Rickenbacher played electric piano. A group of children under the direction of Libby Kono played violins, and the Dharma Drum Kids recited short teachings of the Buddha. The "Three Bears", Lindley, Giora and Robert, also performed, and Robert Lapides the Magnificent performed magic tricks. We would like to thank everyone for their help in making this a wonderful occasion, especially Jack Wu and Estelle Gerard, the M.C.s.



Some of the Dharma Drum Kids

On June 1 Master Shen-yen spoke at the Taiwan Center in Flushing, NY.

Master Sheng-yen spoke in Central Park on June 8 as part of "Change Your Mind Day", sponsored by "Tricycle" magazine.

Master Sheng-yen participated in two days of video taping for a television program in the "A Different Voice" series, for Taiwan television. "A Different Voice" is a series of eight half hour programs concerned with social issues such as family and education.

Upcoming Events:

All Day Sitting: June 22, July 6, Aug. 3 and Sept. 7, 9AM to 8PM. Please call for further information and to register.

Three-day Retreat: Aug. 31 to Sept. 2. Please call for further information and to register.

Annual Meeting: Sunday, July 7 afternoon. For members, and freinds are also welcome.

Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra All Day Recitation: The complete sutra will be recited in Chinese, and there will be a short talk, a blessing for the living and the dead, and the transfer of merit. If you are interested in the reading sutras as a spiritual practice, we recommend this day of recitation.

Please note that we have changed some of our regular programs and added new ones:

Group Meditation: Tuesday evenings from 7 to 9 PM. Thursday group meditation has been canceled, and instead we will offer tso-ch'an (sitting meditation) instruction by appointment, in the months when there is no Beginners' Meditation Workshop.

Beginners' Meditation Workshops: now held every other month. The next will be on August 17, from 9 AM to 1 PM in English, and from 2 to 6 PM in Chinese. Methods of sitting and walking meditation, breathing, sleeping, yoga exercises and massage will be covered, as well as the theory and stages of meditation practice. Please call for further information and to register.

Introductory One-day Meditation Retreat: Our first Introductory Retreat was very successful, so we will have these every other month, alternating with the Beginners' Meditation Workshops. Retreats will be held from 9 AM to 5 PM. on July 20 and Sept. 21. Please call for further information and to register.

One-day Ch'an Retreats: June 22, 9 AM to 8 PM. Please call for further information and to register.

Special Ch'an Class: Wednesdays, May 15 to June 26, 7 to 9 PM. Master Sheng-yen comments on the Letters of Ch'an Master Ta-hui (Jp. Daie, 1088-1163). Ta-hui was one of the greatest revivers of the Lin-chi (Jp. Rinzai) Ch'an tradition, through the use of hua-t'ou practice. The letters of Ta-hui range from the problem of facing death to the unborn Buddha Mind. In particular, Ta-hui addresses lay practitioners and explains how engaging in worldly occupations can be transformed into opportunities to practice Ch'an. Please call for further information.

The Friday Night Gathering: Fridays, May 17 to June 21, 7 to 9 PM, followed by a half hour of socializing. In this course, both beginners and experienced students engage in group practice and receive guidance from Master Sheng-yen. Master Sheng-yen is currently giving Ti-chang (Dharma talks, Jp. teisho) on poems and kung-ans (Jp. koans) from the Ch'an tradition. Please call for further information.

Tai-chi Chuan class: Thursday evenings from 7:30 to 9 PM, beginning in July, taught by David Ngo

Ongoing Activities, except during retreats:

Recitation Group: Mon. evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 P.M. Amitabha Buddha recitation in Chinese, and prostrations.

Group Meditation: Tues. evenings from 7:00 to 9:00 P.M.

Ch'an Sitting Group: Fri. 7:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M., with a social half hour until 9:30. An evening of sitting and walking meditation, with a short talk on the application of Ch'an to daily life or the concepts and methods of Ch'an. This is also an opportunity to ask Master Sheng-yen or one of the resident monks for guidance in practice. Please call for details.

Sunday Program: Meditation, chanting, vegetarian lunch, afternoon talk and afternoon meditation. 10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.

First Saturday of each month: One day Ch'an retreat, 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Please call for details and to register.

Last Saturday of every other month: Beginners' Meditation Workshop. In English: 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. In Chinese 2:00 to 6:00. Please call for details and to register.

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